



Vigilantes The Dream of Reason

Arte de Conducta • October 2004-January 2005 • Tania Bruguera

Vigilantes: The Dream of Reason

Tania Bruguera

Vigilante is one of those rare words that is spelled the same in two languages – in this case, Spanish and English. The word has a different meaning in each language, but in both it relates to social and political contexts or behaviors. In Spanish vigilante defines a person who watches or is observant. It is a state of awareness. In modern English the definition refers to citizens who “take the law into their own hands” when they feel that the actions of established authori-

ties are inappropriate. The word vigilante represents two reactions towards power: in Spanish the word refers to an individual who collaborates with, or is part of a dominant political system; in English it refers to an individual involved in the creation of alternative power structures that draw attention to the imperfections of the system.

The Latin root of the word vigilante is *vigilia*, which is defined as a state of being between wakefulness and sleep. Keeping this definition in mind, this project—a nightmare for some, an irrational dream for others—takes the

form of a series of performances carried out while flying in and out of the United States. All of the performances follow the same guidelines: they start when the plane takes off and end when it lands; my actions are recorded on video by the person sitting next to me; the subject matter of each performance is randomly determined by a neighboring passenger (the one who assumes the role of amateur videographer); the video documentation remains unedited.

Being a passenger, interacting in unconventional ways with people I don’t know, establishes the critical context for this

project. In choosing a moving airplane as the location where these works unfold—a site with clear restrictions on individuals—I want to draw attention to the fact that planes have become an icon of fear within the collective memory of people from the United States. One of the main issues I want to explore with this work is the role of witnessing in the transmission of experience. In this case, what the witness experiences is passed on through the use of a video camera.

The title of this series of in-flight performances cites Francisco de Goya's *The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters* (copper plate 43/80) published in 1799. The engraving portrays an individual surrounded by nightmarish creatures that inhabit a dreamworld governed by irrational thoughts and fears. I believe we are living in a world much like this, where the nightmares of history continue to repeat themselves. Political actions based on rational thought have created an environment dominated by irrationality and repression. In this world, fear is generated as a byproduct and becomes a tactic for control.



Vigilantes • Jennifer Oldham & Kyla Miller

Flight # UA-983

October 10, 2004

Leaving the United States of America.

Security checks the bags. Waiting for extra screening.

Entering the plane. Window seat, row to the right. Airplane full. Two girls in the neighboring seats. The plane takes off. Puts on a cotton medical mask that covers most of her face. Addresses the passenger in the neighboring seat, asking for a word, any word. [One passenger] says "chink." Takes a mirror out of the

purse. Writes the word on it. Puts the mirror in front of her. [The other passenger] says "silence." Asks the closest passenger if she would like to videotape. [The girl] agrees and receives a video camera with an extra tape. The flight is two hours. Takes a needle out of her purse. Takes a single hair from her head. Strings it through the needle. Starts sewing the cotton mask. Continues sewing until the word "silence" is completed.

The plane lands.

Video camera and tapes are returned.







Vigilante • Kuo Sa Chen

Flight # UA-5286
October 12, 2004

Entering the United States of America.

Security checks the bags. Waiting for extra screening.

Have to go to the U.S. Customs in Canadian territory. A customs officer arrives at the desk. Takes the travel identification and immigration documents. He leaves. Waiting for 25 minutes. The officer returns. Asks questions. Gives back the documents.

Entering the plane. Window seat, row to the left. Middle and aisle seats empty. Elderly woman in the neighboring aisle seat, row to the right. The plane takes off. Asks the neighbor if she would like to tape. [The woman] agrees and receives a video camera with an extra tape. The flight is two hours. [The woman] needs technical assistance. The camera is turned on. Takes one ice-cube and puts it inside her mouth. Both hands are inside the mouth. Starts reciting *Ithaka*, a poem by Constantine Cavafy. No recognizable sound comes out of her mouth. Once the ice is melted inside her mouth a new ice-cube

is taken from the glass in front of her and introduced to her mouth. Both hands are inside the mouth. Starts reciting *Ithaka*. No recognizable sound comes out of her mouth. Repeats action.

The plane lands.

Video camera and tape are returned.







Vigilante • Pamela R. Haunschild

Flight # UA-1107

October 24, 2004

Entering the United States of America.

Security checks the bags. Waiting for extra screening.

Have to go to the U.S. Customs in Canadian territory. A customs officer behind the desk takes the travel identification and immigration documents. He leaves. Waiting for 15 minutes. The officer returns. Asks questions. Gives back the documents.

Entering the plane. Aisle seat, row to the left. Middle seat empty. Middle-aged woman in the far seat. The plane takes off. Puts a dental device in her mouth, isolating a tooth. Takes off coat. Wears a T-shirt with the text "Dissent Without Fear." Asks the neighbor if she would like to tape. [The woman] agrees and receives a video camera with an extra tape. The flight is two hours. Some technical confusion. [The woman] engages in intermittent conversation about the taping and use of the camera. Flight attendants serve food. Normal behavior. Stands up. Walks around the aisle. Sits. Stands up. Walks around the aisle. Sits.

The plane lands.

Video camera and tape are returned.







Vigilantes • Pilot/Captain

Flight # UA-5148
October 26, 2004

Leaving the United States of America.

Security checks the bags. Waiting for extra screening.

One of the first five people to enter the plane. Talking to the flight attendant and explaining the desire to read the Constitution of the United States via the intercom speaker in the plane. Negotiation. Propose to the flight attendant that she read it. [The flight attendant] talks to the captain of the plane and explains the desire

to read the text over the intercom while leaving United States territory. [The captain] asks for the reason behind the desire and receives an answer. [The captain] is willing to do it. [The captain] wants to read the text in advance. He receives the copy of the text. [The captain] says it is too long. [The captain] receives a shorter edited version of the text. [The captain] reads it and says that he can't do it because anything he or the flight attendant reads over the intercom is heard by ground control. [The captain] closes the cabin door. Looking for the assigned seat. Aisle seat, row to the left. Middle and aisle seats empty.

The plane takes off.

The plane lands.

The Weight of Suspension: Tania Bruguera's *Vigilantes* Performances

Erin Manning

Silence first came to mind. Tania Bruguera's recent performances, two of four inflight segments from Chicago to Montreal/Toronto and back, take place in complete silence. No discursive relation emerges, no explanation, no contextualization.

In the first, Bruguera wears a white cotton mask which she painstakingly sews, using her own hair. It is a pas-

senger who suggests the word to be sewn. No motif is immediately available—only she knows if her sewing will finally dispel the silence with a word. In the second, her voice is numbed by the ingestion of ice, her mouth full and waiting, melting ice giving rise to a new mouthful.

But over the time it took me to begin to digest these experiences while viewing the video documentation of Bruguera's performances, it seemed to me that silence was only a peripheral factor. What these performances are really calling forth is a rethinking of time.

Even more than the silence we have come to expect of air travel, where I often do not seek to know the person sitting next to me, we feel air travel through an experience of time, suspended. From our first moments in the airport, to the plea not to unfasten our seatbelts until the plane safely arrives at the terminal, we feel the weight of this suspension.

It is this very suspension that has been indelibly altered since our experience—near or far—of 9/11, an experience which has forced us to make a connection between the weight of suspension

and politics. We have learned—even those of us who have not wanted to think these links—that there is a sense in which the time of travel involves a certain kind of unknowable risk. While we always knew of this risk—the risk of falling out of the sky—we now know it from the particular experience of the incessant re-playing of an image which won't soon be forgotten, the image of planes stopping time.

Time, then, seems to be at stake. This time is not a single time. In the case of Bruguera's inflight performances, it is the doubled time of the performance

and its documentation. What we are dealing with here is not the performance “as such” but its replaying, through the eyes of another passenger, on a videotape that will always betray a certain directive, a perspective given by the very call of that performance. Bruguera will have asked a stranger sitting next to her that the performance be taped without giving her any specific directions. An amateur video will have resulted, where the camera will have decided in advance that the event in question become the unspeakability of the performance of the silence in the next seat, the timed timelessness of Bruguera, sitting

in an airplane, waiting for the trip to end. The performance will never have been understood as the flight itself.

The second time, the time of the documented performance—to call this a film would be to overestimate its simplistic qualities of documentation—is a particular time, and it is this time which concerns me most in light of Bruguera's inflight performances. In this “second time”, the time of the flight is re-arranged; it is the time when the question of the performance becomes the question of Bruguera. From the experience of having nothing to do with the other bodies in our midst,

simply waiting for the weight of timelessness to pass, to the experience of keeping an eye on Bruguera and feeling, with her, the experience of the wait, we are engaged in a political rethinking of the time/space of performance.

To rethink politics is to place the composition of spacetime at the centre of its problematic, asking not how a performance fills spacetime, but how it creates it. To challenge spacetime with such subtlety is to find a way to recast the politics of time after 9/11. Tania Bruguera offers us not a mute performance, but a renegotiation of the silence of the weight of suspension.

Performing Lag Time

Tagny Duff

The flight of time is not a straight path from point A to point B. Nor is the time of flight. The movement of time generates a *lag*—between here and there, departure and arrival, movement and stasis. While flying en route to a destination there is *time lag*; landing in another time zone creates *jet lag*; and when waiting for computer circuitry to crush binary code there is *lag time*. These forms of lag represent time as something that is lost, static or unproductive. The lag I am referring to is anything but fixed or still. It is the time when past

and present collide with futurity. It is the time when we are simultaneously flying and falling. It is “overfull, in excess of the actually-performed action.”¹ This is the excess generated during Tania Bruguera’s inflight performances, videotaped as part of *Vigilantes: The Dream of Reason*.

Travelling on an airplane draws us into an experience of lag time where individuals partake in collective anaesthetics. My daydream allows me to believe that the airplane’s floor is the ground and there is no possibility of falling thousands of feet to my death. The dream allows me to forget that I might not make it to my

destination in a couple of hours, let alone never arrive. I forget the images of hijacked planes and the sound of screaming passengers. The body’s synaesthetic cognitive system has learned how to protect itself from the trauma of accidents and the shock of excess by numbing the organism: “to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become rather, one of anaesthetics.”²

In the eight flights that Bruguera took in and out of the United States during the *Time Zones* project in 2004,³ a small dose of speed is added to the anaesthetized

senses, creating synaesthetic experiences in the form of performances for the video camera. With these performances, Bruguera asks passengers sitting nearby to collaborate by suggesting actions and words for her to use. She also asks them to videotape what takes place. Complete strangers are given the role of amateur videographer and asked to record events in whatever way they choose, without any direction from the artist. As a result, a fellow passenger becomes Bruguera's and ultimately the viewer's prosthetic eye recording and witnessing the silent actions occurring on the plane. This roaming eye examines the details of the airplane cabin,

in real time, without the "optical correctness" and "newspeak eyes" of professionalization found in formulaic reality TV shows⁴ (and most performance art documentation). With this body of work, the video recordings and the artist's actions do not exhibit the careful planning or aesthetic parameters of Bruguera's earlier signature pieces. In *Vigilantes*, Bruguera becomes an ambient prop in the video document, not the focus.

The first inflight performance is recorded by Jennifer Oldham and Kyla Miller. They both agree to provide Bruguera with a word and to videotape whatever

happens. One of the women suggests the word "chink," the other suggests "silence." Bruguera responds by writing "chink" on a small mirror. Then she pulls a hair from her head and threads it through a needle. With needle and thread in hand, she looks into the mirror and begins sewing the word "silence" onto the medical mask now covering her face. There isn't a literal connection between the words given and Bruguera's response. The event is without syntax, nor does it represent a pre-formulated message. For two hours the eye of the passenger lingers on Bruguera. We inhabit an intimate space, repeatedly zooming in on the artist's skin

and hair, examining each texture in macro vision.

My apprehension of the word “chink” physically manifests as *time lag*. Frantz Fanon defines time lag as something that delays response, making it always too late to annunciate one’s recognition of racism.⁵ Time lag happens before I can say, “This is not acceptable.” It is the moment when I feel the violence of naming hit my face. Through the force of the camera’s eye, I am suspended in a space of anxiety. I want the video editing to remove this glitch. How can there be no mediation, no removal of this error? Is

this a political statement? Or am I reading racial violence into a harmless word uttered spontaneously in a moment of confusion? There is no ideological closure in this lag.

The second performance takes place on a late night flight, and is videotaped by Kuo Sa Chen. The sound of children speaking in the dark airplane cabin envelopes the image of Bruguera chewing on ice and melting it in her mouth. Unlike the first video, the camera’s gaze remains at a distance, positioned across the aisle from the artist. A boy seated behind Bruguera says, “I am afraid of heights.” The artist

remains silent and still. The passengers and the conversations circulating around her are the focus of this recording. Bruguera’s actions are the ambient gestures of someone who is not threatening, just slightly odd. Other passengers pay little attention to her. No one seems to hear her reciting *Ithaka*, a poem by Constantine P. Cavafy⁶ that focuses on the importance of passage rather than arrival.

As with the first video, I experience the sensation of flight while watching events unfold on the monitor. The child’s reference to “height” reminds me that the plane could crash, which in turn con-

centrates my attention on the anxiety towards air travel that has heightened since 9/11. Even so, the drone of the jet engine makes me feel sleepy. I get antsy. I look at the time left on the video, in an absurd attempt to find out how much time remains on the flight. I am restless and wish time would speed up. Once again I experience the lag time. Here, the glitch and drop-out normally edited out of performance art documentation to mask the slowness of real time is left unedited, making the movement of image and sound feel too slow. The amateur videographer generates the lag as she experiences it. My gaze crosses with hers. I am suspended.

It is a physical sensation that heightens my awareness of the chair I am sitting on. Here, a physical awareness of the passage of time is amplified.

Pamela R. Haunschild documents the third flight. The eye is fixed on Bruguera, who wears a dental dam strapped to her mouth, and a T-shirt that bears the inscription *Dissent Without Fear*. When Bruguera starts walking up and down the aisle, only two passengers seem to notice. When she disappears into the washroom, one of them leans over the aisle and asks Haunschild what is going on. Haunschild explains, "It's just a video." And then she

chuckles, saying, "We're going to be famous."

While watching this video, I find myself waiting for an accident to happen. I wait for the fall that happens every time we walk. I anticipate the fear of taking off and landing; the fear of falling from the sky; the fear that Bruguera will be detained by airplane staff because of her unusual behaviour. The narrative closure that we have come to expect doesn't take place. The eye of the camera blinks and then the anticipation of the fall is over as abruptly as it began.

The three video recordings described above are very different from one another, but they all embed a lag time that is performed in the circuitry of performance art documentation. These tapes raise critical questions pertaining to the practice of documenting (and archiving) performance events. Traditionally, someone with a trained eye—another artist or a professional videographer, for example—maneuvers the camera with the intention of creating an aesthetically pleasing representation of the live event. When edited, these video recordings of performance affect the sense of sight and sound, not the larger range of sensations

experienced in real time, such as touch, smell and taste. (It can be argued that under these circumstances the senses are anaesthetized). Performance documentation of this kind is typically used for disseminating works, securing funding for new projects, or selling performance-related objects to museums. But when an amateur videographer - one who has no direct relation to the field of art - operates the camera and directly contributes to the performance, the status of the document changes. With projects such as *Vigilantes*, the standard protocol of performance documentation is challenged in significant ways. Here, the performance

for and of the camera does not represent or capture the event as performance art. It generates a synaesthetic experience, where sound and image evoke a tactile and visceral experience of time, one that potentially shocks the senses out of anaesthetic slumber.

This series of inflight performances and video documents represent a major shift in Bruguera's practice. In previous works, she is the central subject of events conceived primarily for an art audience. But with *Vigilantes*, Bruguera (dis)places her identity as "artist" by performing *in situ* on United Airlines flights, where other pas-

sengers also play a vital role in determining how the work evolves.⁷ Bruguera is willingly suspended as subject, hovering between anachronism and futurity, both witnessed and forgotten. A sensation akin to the experience of travel.

Vigilantes has none of the overt political content found in Bruguera's earlier works, such as the Ana Mendieta re-enactments carried out between 1985-1996, or *Displacement* (1998-1999), which addressed social and political issues directly related to the history of Cuba. With the inflight performances Bruguera generates a vocabulary of actions that are less defin-

able, gestures that meld with the anaesthetized context of the plane and the videographer's recording of what takes place. Here, we see events unfold through unrehearsed eyes, and for the first time Bruguera insists that the videographer be given credit for co-authoring the work.

The *Vigilantes* performances and video documents embrace a lag time that is often edited or omitted in the time of flight. The works highlight the problem of representing an event as performance art or recalling the duration of travel. The tickets purchased for these flights attempt to regulate time, duration, and space of travel,

forming contracts that govern when and where an identifiable subject will travel. They demand that a given subject have a name and nationality authorized to move from point A to point B. At point A, Bruguera is detained at Customs and asked for her passport and American visa. At point B, her identity is checked once again, and her movements documented. Something analogous happens to all artists working within the art system when they claim authorship for the work of art by showing documentation of the original event that arguably has no origin, only a trace among traces.

The lag of experience and the experience of the lag generated through the inflight performances is irreducible to representation. This is the movement in time that Tania Bruguera's *Vigilantes* compels us to experience. Perhaps this ticket that we read now offers the potential to engage with Bruguera's rethinking of time, not as symbolic sign of a present past, but as a trace and imprint of time, in excess of itself.

Notes

1. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 29.
2. Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Art-work Essay Reconsidered,” *October* (Fall 1992), p. 18.
3. The return flights were between Montreal/Chicago and Toronto/Chicago.
4. Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *The Accident of Art* (New York: Semiotext(e) and Columbia University Press, 2005), p 73.
5. Homi Bhabha, “Culture’s In-Between.” *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. (London; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1996), p.57.
6. Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) is an internationally renowned poet of Greek origin. *Ithaka* was written in 1894.
7. These performances reflect a spirit similar to that of Bruguera’s more recent work entitled *Arte De Conducta*, where unauthorized actions and provocative behaviour amplify and intensify fields of social relations *in situ*.